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# Where It Is Darkest

## Toning Up the Fear Response



**Y**our true power as a human being is being stolen. Not by the dragons of corruption out there but by the dragon of within. Right now, the survival-obsessed parts of your nervous system are using fear to keep you alive. And while that may sound worthwhile, it is not. A life spent under the dominion of the survival instinct is only a fraction of what it means to be truly alive.

In the process of protecting you, the more primitive parts of your brain suppress the activity of the more advanced parts, shutting down the full potential of your nervous system. This causes you to suffer. On some level, you secretly know that you have a greater capacity for seeing, feeling, *and being* than your brain currently allows — and that nagging knowledge will give you no peace.

In the last article, I gave you several tricks for increasing personal magnetism and your overall sense of power. In this article, I'm introducing you to three more — only this time, it's more challenging. These aren't the superficial, "fake it till you make it" kind of strategies. These methods are deep and scary. They get you to deliberately confront fear. I call them the *deep transformers* because they uproot and eliminate suffering at its base. You confront the dragon of within, tame it, and restore the abilities that it has been shutting down. You hack into your lizard brain, relax its stranglehold on your life, and gradually restore your mind to full power.

## How the Lizard Brain Creates Suffering

The deep transformers will appear unremarkable to you unless you understand something important first. For these techniques to work, you've got to see that the primary function of your brain stem and spinal chord is to deceive you. Or rather, to create a sophisticated illusion of separation. Separation of you from your environment.

Why would the nervous system do that to you? Why, to keep you motivated, of course. To keep the species alive. To keep you fighting, fleeing, feeding, and fornicating like all other animals.

In our current stage of evolutionary development, we are no longer sponges clinging to the sea floor. We are not rooted to the Earth, feeding effortlessly on seawater, so our nervous system is quite different now from that of a sponge — or from that of a plant, for that matter. Humans are mobile creatures, physically detached from the ground and from the ocean. To survive in this "cut-off" state of existence, we have evolved a nervous system that sees the world as a hunting ground in which we chase after various "things," obtaining food in different places according to our changing needs. This mobile kind of nervous system appeared over 500 million years ago in amoebas and jellyfish. Fish evolved later, amphibians evolved from fish, reptiles evolved from amphibians, and mammals like us came from reptiles.

In humans, this mobile nervous system is, of course, still present, and it presents a distorted view of the world to our consciousness. Just as a lizard is sometimes compelled to see the objects in its environment as separate from itself, so are humans captivated by the same illusion. Humans still have a lizard brain. Parts of our brain resemble what appear to be earlier stages of evolution, and a lizard's brain looks remarkably like our brain stem and spinal chord. The lizard brain motivates us to chase after food by creating a dynamic drama that is played by two main characters: "you" inside your skin versus the big, bad world *outside* your skin. The lizard brain then proceeds to fill the world "out there" with two kinds of imaginary objects: the things you need and the things that threaten your survival. Dangling carrots and looming monsters. In other words, all those dangling carrots and monsters out there don't actually exist. Rather, your nervous system has re-dramatized the world into a scary funhouse filled with two kinds of objects. With good and evil.

**delusion**: *a persistent, false, psychotic belief — regarding the self or persons or objects outside the self — that is maintained despite undisputable evidence to the contrary*

This revelation is absurd to the average person, of course. For most of us, good and evil are real, and they are out there in the world somehow. Your parents have probably taught you that suffering exists because there really are bad things out there, as well as all those good things that you don't own yet. Like most humans living under the spell of fear and desire, they believe there really are morally wicked entities in the world (snakes, scam artists, earthquakes, pedophiles, pharmaceutical companies). Because these entities hurt us, they are intrinsically evil, right? Furthermore, our leaders and advertisers motivate us by insisting that there really are good objects in the world (pocket knives, home-cooked meals, iPads). Because these things help us survive, they are considered intrinsically good. Somehow there is goodness infused into them, right?

If you are even just a little bit clever, you can see how our division of the world into good and bad objects is really more of a survival mechanism than reality itself. What does the world actually look like beyond the illusory minefield of fear and desire? To find out, you've got to hack into your lizard brain and shut down the fear-desire mechanism. To do that, you sink a little deeper into yourself. You sink beneath your fear and uncover the hidden off switch to suffering. This is much simpler and easier than it sounds.

Humans tend to feel a rising and falling state of continuous unease and dissatisfaction all the time, no matter what is happening around them. Our nervous system has apparently evolved to function this way, and civilization has come along and intensified the predicament. In Buddhism, this feeling of “unsatisfactoriness” is called Dukkha, usually translated as “suffering.” Let’s summarize how suffering works. Your nervous system goes through a three-step process:

**Step 1:** It creates the illusion of a gap between you and the world.

**Step 2:** It fills the world beyond that gap with the objects of fear and desire.

**Step 3:** Tension arises between the imaginary self and the world, which we ignorantly fictionalize into sense of isolation, loneliness, victimhood, and inadequacy.

I present this three-step model to you for the simplest of all possible reasons. To get you to stop focusing on step 2. Step 2 is the familiar realm of religion. Of morality. The error of religion is that it focuses primarily on good and evil, and it ignores how the duality of good and evil arises. In order for techniques such as the deep transformers to work, you’ve got to be willing to let go of your fantasies about right and wrong and hack into the part of your nervous system that generates the framework that makes right and wrong possible in the first place. That framework is built on the illusion of separation. Based on Step 1.

*“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.”*

— *The Bible (NIV)*

*In all the angels, the first act of self-reflection was good.... Thus, the first act was common to them all; it was by the second that they were separated. In the first instant, they were all good; in the second, they were divided into the good and the evil.”*

— *Thomas Aquinas*

When you shift your attention to step 1 and notice your mind creating the separation, the good and the bad simply disappear from the world. They cannot arise. And suffering evaporates.

Well, maybe it does. It takes practice, but make no mistake: you can do it! You *can* free yourself from the modern world's constant attempt to threaten you and entice you with "good" and "bad" objects. When you restore your ability to see that you and your environment are one, you are freed from imaginary external motivators. You undo the curse that descended upon humanity long ago when civilization found a way to prod the lizard brain and make us feel continuously threatened, anxious, and inadequate.

To keep things simple in this article, I'll just be focusing on fear. Because we have been taught to believe that good and evil are intrinsically real, it has become increasingly difficult for our species to delve beneath step 2 and get at the cause of fear. In other words, it is our attachment to good and evil that makes meditation so difficult. You might recall what happened in the myth of Genesis, when Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge and learned about good and evil. The myth is trying to tell us something about morality. That the perception of good and evil is actually a curse. This is something that orthodox religion, with all of its moralizing, does not understand. It refuses to let go of good and evil.

To start working with step 1, you've got to be ready for step 2 when it shows up in your life. You've got to catch yourself at the most primal moment, each time your fear of something "out there" flares up. That includes any feelings of hatred and dislike (known products of fear). For example, take the fear of public speaking. Rather than react to the object of fear out there (the scary mob), you can choose to examine the "object" and see if you can see, touch, hear, or smell the "badness" in it. You will, of course, not be able to find anything intrinsically bad in the crowd of people. "Bad" is an overly simplistic category that the lizard brain applies without restraint. That part of your brain is instinctively creating boogey-men in your environment, and then prodding you to run away from them. Even if the audience you're speaking to really is a mob that plans to lynch you, the badness you see in them is still a projection. Whether or not there is truly any intrinsic evil in a lynch mob (or anywhere in the universe in general) is a far more interesting subject than our lizard brain can comprehend, and it's a subject for a future article.

When you realize that you are simply beholding a physical phenomenon, you might also then notice that you can experience yourself as a similar physical phenomenon. That both you and the object before you are made of the same stuff. The air between

the two of you is also part of this same phenomenon, and all of it — you, the audience, the air everyone is breathing — arises from the same source — the universe — right now. Without labels to keep any of these things separated, they suddenly all fuse together. All becomes one. The good/bad labeling process has been decapitated at its root, and the world beyond those two labels can now step forward before your waking eyes. The real world out there is not right or wrong, good or bad. It is a radiant jewel beyond any human notion of value or price. And it is more than just material. It is more rich, beautiful, and complex than the survival-obsessed lizard brain can possibly imagine.

## **Enlightenment is Easy**

There now, that's enlightenment. That wasn't so hard, was it? Well, maybe it was. It all sounds simple enough, but somehow we don't buy it, right? We've spent our whole lives (or perhaps longer) believing in the world of good and bad objects. Perhaps we have never dared question this duality before. So how can we get past a lifetime of such conditioning? Or for that matter, how can we switch off 300 million years of biological instinct?

Well, let's not assume that such instincts are always in the "on" position. Perhaps they only switch on when they are triggered — and that somehow we have ended up in a state of consciousness that is chronically triggering almost all the time. Perhaps shutting down the survival instinct — and along with it the separation between self and world that it creates — is really quite normal and easy for us to do. Perhaps when the human brain and metabolism are healthy, such a thing is simple and normal for us. I believe that it is quite normal for animals to experience a state of unity with the environment — a state known today as flow — on a regular basis. A lizard basking in the sun seems to be in a state of perfect fusion with the elements. Steps 1, 2, and 3 only kick in when the lizard gets hungry. Or when it notices a large creature roaming nearby. These are scenarios that trigger the illusion of separation.

It is evident that our prehistoric ancestors experienced flow quite often. People in hunter-gatherer cultures today live lives similar to those of our ancient ancestors, and they still experience flow because they make relatively no distinction between themselves and others. Between "me time" and "community time." Or between humans and the Earth. The external motivators of good and bad objects still arise in

their perception, of course, but most of the time, their immersion in whatever it is they are doing provides its own reward. The external goads and goals generated by the nervous system are merely incidental and, most of the time, they are only a minor influence on their lives.

Here's a little gem for you. The best time for our prehistoric ancestors to experience flow was at midnight between their first and second sleep (Yes, humans used to sleep in two shifts). Why does the Buddha sit "Indian-style" when he decides to meditate? Perhaps, the half-lotus and full-lotus meditation postures of the yogi are an overly formalized attempt to recapture the way we used to feel in prehistoric times when we were awake, sitting on the ground in the middle of the night, gazing into our campfire. By that time of night, our bodies had entered into a more deeply fasted state, and we couldn't help but feel an utter kinship to the spirits of the Earth that danced before us in the glowing embers.



Gazing into the campfire. Disappearing into the cracks of those burning embers. This simple kind of enlightenment does not come about so easily for us anymore. We aggrandize it. We put enlightenment on a pedestal or sequester it into the Holy of Holies of a temple high up on a mountain, secluded in a pristine sanctuary reserved for

the spiritual elite. We believe it is something special “out there” (or worse yet, a special place “within”). And thanks to the Protestant work ethic, we think we have to work hard to achieve it.

Nonsense.

The only reason enlightenment has become difficult is because our habits are so out-of-sync with our primal nature. Because we are so cut off from the natural world. In modern times, people who achieve a state of enlightenment through hard work end up laughing at themselves for working so hard to achieve it.

## **Chronic Stress**

But if that rustling in the bushes near my campfire is enough to trigger my fear, effectively shutting down my experience of flow, how is it that our prehistoric ancestors entered the flow-state so easily? Wasn't their world full of danger? Weren't humans hunted by saber-toothed tigers and monstrous cave bears? How is it possible that a dirty, homeless, hand-to-mouth existence can induce enlightenment? The fear and insecurity of homelessness are notorious for shutting down our sense of well-being, right?

You might recall that spiritual masters often encourage us to live the life of a homeless person. The Buddha was a homeless man, and Jesus said something like “Give away all that you own and follow me.” They probably realized that always having something to lose is what keeps us from a more immediate experience of the world. An experience that is infinitely more precious than our civilized sense of ownership provides.

True, our ancestors lived in a wild and dangerous world. They experienced fear often enough. But their fear response was triggered by real and immediate danger. Not by a vague omni-present state of imaginary insecurity in which we are endlessly nagged by the abstractions of civilization. Today, we don't encounter cave bears. Instead, we fear losing our “homes” and our “status.” We are stalked not by wild beasts but by deadlines and mortgage payments. We are jolted alert by artificial beeps and alarms.

Photoshopped images in magazines tell us we are somehow, vaguely, not good-looking enough or that we don't “own” the right stuff. “You'll never get a man, looking like that!” they whisper to the anorexic teenager as she waits in the checkout line. What is



“ownership” anyway? What is “home”? Are these things real? And if they aren’t real, why are we so chronically afraid of losing them? Something has gone terribly wrong.



Chronic Stress

## Acute stress

Make no mistake: our ancestors experienced stress. Occasionally a pack of wolves would terrorize them as they migrated through a forest. A bull mammoth would turn aggressive and charge them during the hunt. It sounds bizarre to us today, but that kind of stress is normal and healthy. It’s good for you! All creatures of the Earth experience it periodically, especially if they have autonomic nervous systems. Humans, on the other hand, do not. We experience counterfeit forms of stress, known today as *chronic stress*. For our homeless, nomadic ancestors, fear was quite a different kind of experience. It arose at appropriate times, in response to very real, material threats. And it arose occasionally, as opposed to this day and age when fear nags us almost all the time. Healthy stress is what physiologists refer to as *acute stress*.

The deep transformers involve conjuring up healthy kinds of stress. They are methods for delving into your lizard brain to prod the stress response so that you can notice how it works and gain control over it. The deep transformers are challenging. They invoke the fear response, and who wants to experience that? Fear actually ends up intensifying the separation that our nervous system creates between ourselves and the world (step 1). As spoiled, coddled, civilized humans, our healthy, instinctive fears have become too deeply buried under civilization’s repression. Our fear response has

become faulty. It misfires, producing needless anxiety, inadequacy, and panic attacks, not to mention autoimmune diseases and a whole host of chronic conditions. It is a rare individual who chooses to conjure up his own fear response in order to put it through a proper workout. When you learn to exercise the fear response, you can restore it back to proper health.



Acute Stress (from the the movie \*10,000 B.C.\* 2008)

To defeat chronic stress, we must re-learn how to experience healthy stress. As you use the following deep transformers to conjure up your fears, remember the most important pointer of all: notice step 2 and let go of it, and then zoom in on step 1. Notice the “otherness” you are creating from your object of fear. Let go of it and dissolve into the all.

*“They thought it a disgrace to go forth in a group. Each entered the Forest Adventurous at the point he himself had chosen, where it was darkest and there was no path.”*

*— from the anonymous author of La Quest del Saint Graal*

## Deep Transformer I: The Wim Hof method

Wim Hof is a famous guy known as the Ice Man. He has achieved numerous world records, most of which involve confronting sensations, environments, and situations that provoke primal fear. Intense cold, intense heat, high altitude, holding the breath for extended periods of time, and swimming in water cold enough to kill the average

person. To condition himself for these harsh tasks, one of the things he does involves a very simple breathing technique, known today as the Wim Hof method:

1. **Relax:** Sit in a meditation posture or lie back on a bed (Never do this exercise in water!).
2. **Hyperventilate:** Using mostly the belly instead of the chest, breathe in and out as deeply and completely as you can. Important: The exhalation should last about double the length of the inhalation (or longer), and each round should be about two to four seconds. Do 30 to 50 breaths. If you feel light-headed or you start to tingle, that's fine.
3. **Hold the breath out:** Allow the lungs to empty via a final exhale, and simply hold your breath with the lungs empty. Hold it until you feel a ravenous urge to breathe, and then hold it for 20 seconds longer. You can do it! Go ahead. Deliberately provoke your fear of suffocation. You might chose to shift around in a relaxed manner to facilitate cell respiration in your muscles, thereby extending the amount of time you can hold the breath. I usually imagine myself underwater and that the ceiling above me is the water's surface glittering overhead. The gap between me and the air up there provokes an instinctive fear of drowning (particularly strong in me, for some reason).
4. **Hold the breath in:** Now breathe in fully, to maximum lung capacity, expanding both the abdomen and the chest. Hold your breath in for 20 to 30 seconds. Close your eyes, and tune into your body. You will notice that your heart beats quickly and some other sensations come and go. Sometimes your hearing fades out and then comes back. This is normal, and it heralds a spike in adrenaline and norepinephrine (fear hormones). This completes the first set.
5. **Repeat twice (for a total of three sets):** Do two more sets, and increase the time of the breath-hold in step 3 each time. You might want to use your smartphone's timer or stopwatch. For gradual boost to overall health, I suggest increasing the breath-hold time of each set by one second every day.

The Wim Hof method stimulates an acute stress response, and in doing so, it appears to prime the immune system. When you do it daily, it conditions the adrenals so that they get triggered as though there were a real and actual danger present, instead of

getting triggered by imaginary vague, abstract threats. You are training your stress response to behave properly.

The effect of doing the Wim Hoff method twice daily will be incremental. You will eventually notice at least two main benefits:

- **Fearlessness:** You will notice that you are less and less influenced by imaginary fears. Any phobias and lurking fantasies you may have been suffering from will begin to disappear. I noticed this quite dramatically when my friends and I were on a boat in the open ocean. We spotted a pod of dolphins, so we stopped the engine in hopes they might approach. I found myself taking the lead, slipping on my fins and mask, plunging into the bottomless blue without hesitation. I dove down to 30 feet and hovered there to listen to the dolphins talking to each other out there, somewhere in the glowing blue haze. It suddenly struck me. What had I just done! Whereas before I would always experience hesitation before entering into such an unfamiliar situation, I had jumped right into the open ocean and descended into the abyss. It wasn't the foolishness of an adolescent (Some teenagers are not yet fully aware of their mortality). I was thinking clearly, acknowledging safety, but my vague fantasies about "something dreadful in the depths" were completely gone. I felt calmly self-possessed and resigned toward the experience of the unexpected. I was ready for anything! The dolphins never did approach, but this experience of fearlessness was a real mile marker for me. I owe it, I believe, largely to the Wim Hof method and its ability to tame the stress response.
- **A healthier immune system:** If you have allergies, they will most likely begin to diminish. An allergy is essentially a more physical kind of stress response, and civilization's chronic stress is strongly correlated with the development of allergies. Doing the Wim Hof method every morning essentially amounts to jabbing yourself with an EpiPen each day. I have a slight allergy to the dander of my pet ferret, Brigid, but after doing the Wim Hof method for a week, I notice that I no longer wake up in the morning with irritated, bloodshot eyes. I was once again able to let my ferret climb up on the bed and sleep on my pillow. The allergy has not gone away completely, but it is barely noticeable anymore. The Wim Hof method has helped countless other people with autoimmune conditions in similar ways — even people with the most severe and debilitating kinds of illness, such as multiple sclerosis, Crohn's disease, and lupus.

You may notice that this technique is especially useful for confronting past trauma. If you suffer from PTSD, it is up to you whether you use the Wif Hof technique (with an added visualization of your traumatic event) to explore your fear and revise it. There are some slight dangers, particularly if you are prone to acting out when faced with the imaginary “monsters” created by your lizard brain. If you confront your fears alone, the risk is yours. Personally, I encourage it, but I also insist that everyone take complete responsibility for their results when using any of the techniques found in *Forbidden Realms*.

## Deep Transformer II: Journaling

Recently, I was helping a student make sense of an essay written over 200 years ago by Benjamin Franklin. In it, Franklin refers somewhat matter-of-factly to his practice of keeping a journal — as though keeping a personal diary is completely normal and natural for a human being to do. My student said that he admired Franklin for his courage, so we began talking about the practice of journaling as means toward developing fearlessness. I asked the student what a journal-keeper normally writes about, and it became obvious that the writer usually writes in the evening so that he can re-experience the day in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

The practice of keeping a journal, if it's only a summary of the day, could be quite boring, unless you use journaling as a deep transformer — as a way to confront your irrational fears and eliminate them. It should come as no surprise that so many of the most courageous thinkers, creators, and leaders in the world kept a daily diary. Their nightly practice of journaling served as a means of confronting the fears that they experienced that day. In the process of doing this, they are able to revise their fear response — a little-known practice, referred to today as *limbic revision*. Here's how it works:

1. Well before bedtime, sit down relive the day. Focus specifically on anything that happened during the day which caused you to suffer. For example, did your boss say something that triggered an instinctive fear of rejection? Did you stress out when you had to speak to a large group of people? Did a weather forecast trigger your fear of losing your home.
2. Describe the triggering scenario in detail — but specifically, use figurative language to turn an abstract chronic stressor into an acute, real-life stressor. In particular,

try to objectify your fear. What is the imaginary enemy that you're afraid of. What real-life stressor might it symbolize. Here are some examples of how to objectify a vague fear into a more concrete, real-world object: **Fear of public speaking:** An angry mob that will banish you from the community. **A looming deadline:** A bear stalking you from behind. **Monetary debt:** The sensation of drowning or struggling to tread water. **Fear of uncertainty:** an unseen monster in the dark forest near your campfire. Or a sea monster in the depths of the ocean beneath your fragile canoe. **A power struggle at work:** Losing one of your fresh kills to a rival hunter.

3. Reflect briefly upon how your fear is normal and natural. You are not alone in your experience of it, especially when you can see how it resembles a real-world stressor that an animal might encounter in the wild. You can see how this will help you revise your fear response. You will eventually not get triggered by it. Since a looming deadline is not really a predator, you will learn to relax and take a more matter-of-fact approach to a time challenge. Since a speaking engagement is not the same thing as an angry lynch mob, you will learn to stop making a life-and-death scenario out of public speaking.

The more you journal in this way, the more fearless you will become. Your fear response will simmer down, and only flare up at appropriate times when there are more immediate, real-life threats to your physical well-being.

## Deep Transformer III: Magical Evocation

This practice gets at the root of the lizard brain's tricks. It confronts the dragon of within and the demons it conjures into your imaginary outer world. It shouldn't come as any surprise to a reader of *Forbidden Realms* that this is a magical technique invented by shamans thousands of years ago. Shamans noticed what was happening to humans as civilization imposed vague, faceless, chronic stressors upon humanity, making us chronically ill. Magical evocation is a means of conjuring up and confronting those nameless, faceless terrors. It is away of increasing personal power in the presence of

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The subject of evocation deserves an entire *Forbidden Realms* article unto itself. The next article will explore this revered and arcane practice in depth. Stay tuned!

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